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# 'I don't wanna be anything other than me': A case study on gender representations of teenagers in American teen drama series *One Tree Hill*



**ABSTRACT**

*Economic and demographic trends have turned young people into a target audience, and media producers and the marketing industry have realized that the contemporary teenage market has substantial potential. Television is still the most popular medium among teenagers; along with web surfing and social networking, television is part of teens' daily media use. Media content is essential in teenagers' self-representation: fictional media programmes produce commodified meanings, and models of behaviour and information about norms and values are repetitively delivered by attractive characters in the form of entertainment. This article gives an overview of the gender representations of teenagers in the American teen series by Schwahn* One Tree Hill (2003–2012) *by using a qualitative thematic textual analysis. We can say that the series revolves around a male-oriented world in which basketball is the main topic. Teen subcultures are often portrayed in a prototypical manner and traditional discourses of masculinity and femininity are often reinforced. A more liberal stance was noted regarding (female) sexuality.*

**KEYWORDS**

gender stereotypes
representations
sexuality
teenagers
teen series

## INTRODUCTION

Media, and more specifically television, online communication and mobile phones are predominant in the everyday lives of today's teenagers. Recent research[1] (Adriaens et al. 2011a; Roberts and Foehr 2008; Vergeer et al. 2008) shows watching TV is by far the most popular type of media use among teenagers aged between 14 and 18. It is hardly surprising that web surfing and social networking also make up a large part of teens' daily media consumption. Hence, teenagers' (gender and sexual) identity is shaped within a complex and contradictory cultural landscape in which television, online communication and teen culture are intertwined (Johansson 2007).

As teen culture becomes more mediated and the media provide teenagers 'with symbolic resources for constructing or expressing their own identity' (Buckingham 2008: 5), the importance of media in teenage life is growing (L'Engle et al. 2006; Osgerby 2004b). The media industry produces commodified meanings, shapes our view of reality and offers us tools for interpreting relationships and defining identities. As gender discourses and ideas about how gender should be experienced are embedded in media texts, this article aims to investigate 'how texts "position" the female subject in narratives and textual interactions and in so doing contribute to a definition of femininity' (McQuail 2005: 345) and masculinity. A certain ideology and social power are reflected in fictional representations, hence the media give information about (sexual) norms and values. More often than not, this information is delivered by attractive characters, reflects, favours and reinforces the hegemonic discourse, established values and power relations in contemporary society (Hirst and Harrison 2007; Lemish 2010: 1; McQuail 2005: 494). Moreover, media 'also contribute to the construction of hegemonic definitions that often appear to be self-evident' (Jacobson 2005: 5), such as gender-related stereotypes. In doing so, they contribute 'to the continuation of gender inequality and discrimination' (Lemish 2010: 8).

This article analyses the ideological constructs of masculine and feminine underlying the fictional representations of teenagers in popular American teen drama series *One Tree Hill* (*OTH*) (Schwahn 2003–2012). As youth-oriented programmes influence identity construction, evaluation of teen television content is necessary (Bindig 2008). An introduction to teen television and youth studies will be given, followed by an overview of the research on teenage representations. Next, the method of qualitative thematic textual analysis will be explained before the results of this study will be discussed.

## MEDIA, TEEN SERIES AND IDENTITY

US fictional formats, aimed at the general audience as well as youth-oriented programmes, are sold worldwide and dominate the European television market (Chalaby 2006: 33; De Bens and de Smaele 2001: 51). While series such as *True Blood* (Ball 2008-present) and *Desperate Housewives* (Cherry 2004–2012) target the general audience, others specifically target teens, such as *The Vampire Diaries* (Lloyd, Williamson and Plec, 2009-present), *Gossip Girl* (Schwartz and Savage 2007-present) and *OTH*. A series is regarded as youth oriented if characters are mostly teenagers and it contains themes such as sport, music, alcohol and drug (ab)use, and love and relationships (friendship, romantic or sexual) among high school students (Wee 2010). These recurring themes represent the basic struggles of teenage life, which remain unchanged over generations (Owen 1997: 141–42). Youth-oriented series are not a new

genre, but have increased since the 1990s. This rise in teen programmes as the demographic and economic trends shift has highlighted the importance of teens as a potential consumer market (Dickinson 2004: 99; Osgerby 2004a: 82; Giroux 2009).

Construction of identity is an integral part of adolescence, a transitional period where one is transformed from child to adult, and during which a world based on generational differences is replaced by one grounded on sexual differences (Pasquier 1996: 354). According to Crossley (1996: 159), identities 'are *continually* being negotiated and challenged at an inter-subjective level', and are contested through and against representations of our claimed social groups. This influences how people think about and represent themselves (Howarth 2002: 158–59). Hall (2000) calls ubiquitous visual culture 'the machinery of representation', and contemporary popular visual culture plays an important role in the articulation of identities. School, parents and peers also help us in our gendered world, particularly in adolescence when we begin to form a personal and social identity, and modify our behaviour according to the gendered scripts society advocates. These scripts are not stable, but differ across time and space (Butler 2006: 91). Also unfixed is the meaning of gender, which varies according to specific cultural and historical settings, and is subject to ongoing discursive struggle and negotiation (van Zoonen 1994).

Research on the representations of gender in contemporary media products is therefore crucial and important, however, only a few studies have been conducted on representations of teenagers in general and in teen drama series in particular. Most of these studies have employed a quantitative content analysis rather than a qualitative approach. However, it is not only important to determine the frequency of certain depictions, but also to analyse *how* they are depicted. Researchers of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University in Birmingham (e.g. Hebdige 1979) were the first to focus on youth, new youth cultures and subcultures as a site for resistance. However, the subjects used in these studies were predominantly male. In 1975, the exclusion of female subjects in the studies was critiqued by Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, leading to gender being added 'to established patterns of analysing class, consumption and cultural production' (Driscoll 2002: 186). Youth studies were then addressed from a feminist cultural studies perspective (McRobbie 2000). The nature of teenage representations was studied by Heintz-Knowles (2000), who argued that teenagers in entertainment television are not motivated by school-related issues, but by peer relationships, sports and hobbies, and romance. Characters in teen series from the 1990s and 2000s deal with problems involving romance, sexuality, friendship and family. Particularly in American youth-oriented dramas, teenagers are portrayed are 'super-individuals' or 'as models of what American adults wish they themselves could be' (Aubrun and Grady 2000: 8). Teens are more likely to be represented as autonomous, rather than in mentoring relationships. Therefore, it is not surprising that the teens, as 'super-individuals', solve many of their problems without help from adults.

We view a world on television that is disproportionally male, especially in youth-oriented programmes (Zurbriggen et al. 2007). Boys are often connected with 'doing' in the public sphere (e.g. rational, ambitious, aggressive and independent), whereas girls are associated with 'being' (e.g. passive, vulnerable, sensitive and dependent). This usually results in boys as the heroes. Although (sexy) heroines have grown in popularity in recent times, girls usually either need to be saved or are merely part of the background.

They hold secondary positions and their value 'is defined by their meaning for the male heroes' (Lemish 2010: 2, 10). 'Female characters are significantly more likely than males characters to be attractive and provocatively dressed' (Zurbriggen et al. 2007: 5); looking 'sexy' is equated with attractiveness. Sexiness and beauty are valued over intelligence and plots involving teenage girls centre on dating and shopping (Kim et al. 2007; Signorielli 2007: 174–75). The majority of the girls are thin, and the appearance of more than a quarter of them is regularly commented on (Jacobson 2005: 27–29; Nayak and Kehily 2008: 147). Appearance and beauty are vital to a girl's self-esteem and necessary to attract a partner (Kim et al. 2007; Ross 2010). However, this focus on a sexy, slim body has appeared only recently (Thiel-Stern 2008). According to Gill (2007: 149), a 'sexy body' is presented as a women's key source of identity, and it needs constant monitoring, remodelling, surveillance and discipline as a girl is always at risk of 'failing'. 'Today, a sleek, toned, controlled figure is normatively essential for portraying success' (Gill 2007: 150). Male characters, on the other hand, often have athletic, muscular bodies; however, their appearance is seldom the subject of discussion. Boys are characterized by their abilities and talents, not their looks (Brown et al. 2002: 3; Signorielli 2007: 174–75).

Studies (e.g. Zurbriggen et al. 2007; Buckingham and Bragg 2004) focusing on teen sexual representations stress that such representations are more abundant in popular teen programmes than ever. The impression is created that 'everyone is doing it' (Ward 2002: 2). Sexual content itself has also changed. Characters have their first sexual encounter at a younger age, and the encounters do not necessarily take place within a committed relationship (Eyal et al. 2007: 317).

A dichotomy arises in the representation of teens' sexuality, as does a sexual double standard; girls' sexuality equals passivity and responsibility, whereas boys' sexuality is natural, urgent and relentless. A girl is supposed to be sexually attractive but cannot be too sexually active or assertive. Boys generally take the first step towards sexual relations, and girls are responsible for addressing their boundaries. Sexually active characters rarely take precautions against pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and girls are solely responsible for contraception (Batchelor et al. 2004; Mastronardi 2003; Ward 2003). Virginity loss is often addressed. For boys, this results in a higher social status, whereas girls' physical desires are rarely explored (Kelly 2010). Another stereotype is the representation of a boy who has sex with many girls, as a 'real man' never turns down an opportunity for sex (Brown et al. 2002: 3; Signorielli 2007: 174–75). This double standard results in encouragement and reward of boys' sexuality, with characters portrayed as active choosers, in contrast to the passivity, restriction and compliance of female sexuality (Aubrey 2004: 506). The impression is created that there is 'good' versus 'bad' sexuality; 'young women are generally under more pressure to behave correctly … Whereas young women easily acquire bad reputations, young men still have a wider range of sexual opportunities' (Johansson 2007: 41). Those aged sixteen or older are assumed to be heterosexually active, and engage in risk-free, recreational sexual behaviour (Aubrey 2004; Hust et al. 2008; Wright 2009). The media 'typically focus on the positive aspects of sex rather than problems and risks' (Fisher et al. 2009: 124) and there is little room for the emotional side of sexuality (Batchelor et al. 2004). Heterosexual scripts are dominant and positive representations of gay, lesbian and bisexual teenagers are lacking.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative method of thematic textual analysis was used to analyse the ideological constructions of masculinity and femininity underlying the representations of teenagers in contemporary American teen series *OTH*. Textual analyses, which are usually interpretative, are used to understand latent meanings in texts, and have been successfully transferred and incorporated in humanities in general and television studies in particular (Larsen 2002: 117–20; McKee 2003: 73). Texts in such research can be programmes, series, episodes, clips and so on (Wickham 2007: x). According to McKee, this method 'tries to make educated guesses at some of the most likely interpretations of a text. […] This happens within a certain cultural frame and a certain time span' (2003: 1). Therefore, there is no objective truth; instead, possible interpretations and tendencies are revealed. This in-depth analysis is an exploration of the content of the representational strategies used in audiovisual texts to represent teenage identity, but also includes visual elements as gendered media representations are not always verbalized but may contain gender codes and markers (Jacobson 2005: 18).

*OTH* was selected due to its popularity among Flemish teenagers aged 14–18 years. This popularity was investigated previously using a large-scale survey of 1544 participants (see endnote 1) as ratings are not available in Belgium. Overall, *OTH* was the most popular American teen series among participants, the most recently watched DVD series among teenage girls, and the fifth favourite programme of Flemish teenage girls. This popularity is also prevalent in North America, as illustrated by the weekly and seasonable Nielsen rankings (see www.nielsen.com). Therefore, this case study is relevant for the construction of theory. *OTH* first aired in North America on 23 September 2003, and the ninth (and last) season is currently showing on the free to air CW Television Network. It is a successful international export and has been nominated 27 times for and won two Teen Choice awards (Internet Movie Database n.d.).

The next step in the two-way sampling included selecting episodes. Selection was necessary due to pragmatic constraints such as time and finances. Analysis of a sample of episodes, spread across seasons, was preferred over analysing an entire season as different seasons offer different storylines and a more profound evolution of characters. Unfortunately things will be excluded by focusing on a selection of episodes, but this limitation was taken into account when analysing the findings. The sample contains approximately eleven hours of television and includes sixteen 40-minute episodes. The first, eighth, sixteenth and last episodes of the first four seasons were used, as later seasons featured characters emerging as adults and their lives after college.

Each selected episode was subdivided into sequences. Each sequence was then organized around themes of sports, music, friendships, relationships, sexuality, physical appearances, delinquency, morality and drugs. These topics articulate different aspects of teenage identity, such as personal, social and sexual, and are therefore crucial in the study of contemporary teen culture. The thematic groups were studied for spoken language, facial expressions and body language, and specific emphasis was placed on gender differences and gender-related stereotypes.

An open coding system was applied, and the codes were structured according to theoretical insights gleaned during literature review. However, it was possible for new codes to emerge during the coding process. The authors

discussed the implementation of new codes, and rigorous coding and analyses were conducted. The list of codes consisted of objectification (e.g. looking good is valued over intelligence), sexual objectification (e.g. seeing someone as a means for virginity loss, rather than an object of love and potential relationship), self-objectification (e.g. exposing cleavage to distract a man), traditional gender roles (e.g. linking femininity to taking care of someone), emancipative gender roles (e.g. a successful female artist, a single-parent household run by a man), active/passive distinction (e.g. hero/victim, unemotional/overemotional) and other noteworthy gender stereotypes (e.g. girls eat when they feel miserable). More evident codes were physical appearance, drug use, smoking, alcohol consumption, violence, sexual (suggestive or explicit) images, contraception, STDs, sexual double standard, casual sex and friendship. This list is non-exhaustive, as the more open coding system made it impossible to define all variables.

## RESULTS

This section is first organized around recurring themes in youth-oriented programmes (sport, music, appearance, relationships and morality). These themes are connected with identity construction and struggles adolescents cope with during puberty. Specific emphasis will be placed on possible gender differences in the articulation of different aspects of teenage identity. *OTH* and its main characters are introduced and a brief synopsis is given.

### *Sports and music: The ultimate ingredients for a teenage life*

The first four *OTH* seasons focus on the lives of teenagers in Tree Hill, a small but eventful city in North Carolina. The storyline revolves around a high school basketball team and the relationships between protagonists Lucas, Nathan, Peyton, Brooke and Haley. The main characters are the teenagers, but their parents, with their struggles and demons from the past, are also the focus of the plot. Themes that recur from one generation to the next link the teenagers and their parents. The first season starts with a basketball contest between two half-brothers Nathan and Lucas. Nathan is raised by his father (Dan) and is the captain of the basketball team and the popular teenagers, together with his girlfriend Peyton. Peyton's best friend is Brooke, a beautiful head cheerleader. Lucas, raised by his mother (Karen), and his best friend Haley are not part of the popular gang. Instead, they hang out at a basketball court near the river with others who are similarly mocked by the popular teens. A transgression appears at the end of the first season when friendship forms among all characters, and a teenage marriage between Haley and Nathan is incorporated into the storyline. *OTH*'s main focus is basketball, and each male character is in some way connected to the sport. Stereotypical representations of jocks appear throughout the series, and all players have athletic and muscular bodies. Being part of the team ensures status and popularity among girls (cf. Brown et al. 2002; Signorielli 2007). Male teenagers are unmotivated by school-related issues, as Heintz-Knowles (2000) argued, and instead devote their time to sport. Basketball is a major topic of conversation, and the playoffs are important social events. Basketball and being successful are top priorities for the boys, and the impression is given that sport is the only thing they have in life. Not being able to play is a major issue, as basketball seems to be the glue that holds the small community together. Moreover, basketball defines players' identities.

Another stereotypical image can be found in the popular, attractive and slim cheerleaders who cheer players to victory but are never shown actively participating in sports (cf. 'doing' versus 'being', Lemish 2010). Hence, the girls are part of the popular clique; the beautiful cheerleaders who date the players. This gendered representation of youth and sport is mainly articulated on the level of the plot (Bordwell 1985), but also on the cinematographic level of the camera position. The basketball players are the most dominant characters, and occupy most of the screen space and time, whereas the girls appear as passive sidekicks.

Sports and teen culture are intertwined in *OTH*, as is music. Popular music is regularly used in the series, and other teen dramas, to stress or amplify emotions or tension in certain situations; 'although heavily reliant on dialogue, teen dramas are also characterized by their use of rock music' (Philo 2011: 162). Here, music is used as an associative power, one that 'amplifies the mood or atmosphere and also tries to convey the "emotional significance" of a scene: the true *real* feelings of the characters involved in it' (Frith in Turner 1993: 59). However, music is not used only in the background. Popular musicians in contemporary teen culture, such as Sheryl Crow, Jimmy Eat World and Fall Out Boy make guest appearances and perform in the series' music club. This intertextuality is a generic strategy used in CW teen-oriented shows to attract viewers and increase ratings (Wee 2010).

Music also plays a significant role in the daily and social lives of Peyton and Haley. Peyton prefers old-school LPs and drives a 1963 Mercury Comet. Her taste in music not only influences the car she drives, but also her choice of college, what she does in her free time (head of the music club) and her appearance, often dressing in a leather jacket, Converse All Stars®, dark jeans and music T-shirts. Music influences her identity. Not everyone understands her passion for music. Nathan, for example, calls it crap and a waste of time. He does not comprehend that music plays the same role in Peyton's life as basketball does in his.

Haley's dream is to be a singer, and when the opportunity arises she leaves her teenage husband and friends to pursue her musical career. This is an emancipative representation of a woman who makes a radical choice for her career. However, she returns to her family and friends later as her success is not worth it without them. This emancipative representation transforms into a rather stereotypical and traditional representation of female ambition. The series fails to address why Haley's husband and friends cannot support her decision and be happy about her successful career. Nonetheless, both female characters are clearly ambitious and successful, even as teenagers. This quite surrealistic or unrealistic impression of achieving goals recurs throughout the series. Each main character is a 'super-teen' who achieves his or her dream before graduation, and is successful, popular and academic, despite the fact schoolwork is barely present in the series (cf. 'super-individuals', Aubrun and Grady 2000).

## *Buddies and studs: Relational representations*

### *Friendship*

A dichotomy between subcultures arises in the beginning of the series, which is a common occurrence in teen series and even in older teenage films such as *Rebel without a Cause* (Ray 1955) (Shary 2005). Two groups of friends oppose each other at the start of the first season; the popular jock/cheerleader group

versus the group that hang out at the court by the river. Members of the first group are envied for their popularity, whereas members of the second group are depicted as outcasts. During the first season, this dichotomy evaporates until they form a close group of friends. The importance of friendship is repeatedly stressed, for example, in Brooke's slogan 'Buds over studs' (buddies over boys). Nonetheless, the close bond between friends is regularly broken, albeit temporarily, mainly due to lies and confusion. Girls' relationships with boys are often the reason behind broken friendships.

However, there is a distinct difference in the way teenagers handle these situations. Girls often react dramatically and emotionally, whereas boys handle problems in a much more taciturn, emotionless manner. The impression is given that boys should control their emotions, especially sadness, while girls are allowed to display their emotions freely. This is a confirmation of 'being' versus 'doing' (cf. Lemish 2010). Negative or disdainful language is often used when two girls end their friendship, and girls are not afraid of using physical violence when a lifelong friendship is about to end, which is a remarkable finding. Although fighting is definitely gendered, it is worth noting that aggression is not only connected with masculinity in *OTH*.

### *Romantic and sexual relationships*

Romantic relationships are often represented as difficult and complex. In the second season, for instance, 16-year-old Brooke has an aversion for a new relationship as it is too complicated. A close friend is often involved in the dynamics of a relationship, which results in drama and the end of the relationship. Physical appearance is considered important in relationships, and romantic relationships involve popular and attractive characters. In addition, boys prefer girls who are sexually attractive. Cheerleaders, for instance, are pretty and the envy of other girls, which makes them the ideal partners for good-looking, athletic boys (cf. Kim et al. 2007; Ross 2010). Less popular or attractive teenagers are stuck with each other. Mouth, for example, is a member of the outcasts and does not play basketball, spending his time as a radio presenter instead. His relationship with Erica ends during the summer when she becomes popular. This implies Mouth is not someone to hang out with when people admire you.

Not all (intimate) relationships are defined as exclusive or as a relationship. The common occurrence of casual relationships becomes apparent in the series' pilot episode. The impression is given that Nathan and Peyton are romantically involved, but this commitment is not exclusive as Nathan kisses another girl. Subsequently, he confesses to Peyton he is not committed to their relationship and has other options. A liberal stance is taken towards sexuality, and sexuality is no longer an exclusive part of a committed relationship. Characters are generally very sexually active, as most of the main characters have casual sex throughout the four seasons. For instance, Lucas and Brooke kiss and have casual sex, but not exclusively and there is no commitment. The difference between Lucas and Felix, her 'friend with benefits' (a friend called on for sex), is that Felix is a purely sexual commitment, whereas Lucas is called on for romance. Fun is very important (i.e. 'it's just sex') in such flings (cf. 'youth-as-fun' versus 'youth-as-trouble', Hebdige 1979).

The transition from romantic to sexual relationship is rarely discussed between partners, and the decision is often taken hastily. There are, however, two exceptions in the sample that show a less liberal stance towards sexuality

and sex is portrayed as meaningful. In the first example, Haley is afraid to have sex for the first time and decides to wait until she is married. Her partner has a hard time with her decision and watches porn to cope with his sexual frustrations. However, he later admits he also wants to wait. The second example is the Clean Teens, a group of mostly girls who are against sex before marriage. However, they are scorned and the group eventually dissolves. A connection between identity and sexuality is drawn, and teenagers push for boundaries, values and norms in these subplots. Teens with more traditional values regarding sexuality and marriage are criticized in this subplot. It also shows teenagers search for their own sexual identity, and that relationships and breakups lead to self-reflection.

Sex is often implied with fade-outs and before-and-after shots. Passionate kissing and embracing are the most common acts in our sample, but no overt portrayals of intercourse occur, which corresponds with previous studies (e.g. Cope-Farrar and Kunkel 2002). The insinuation of sex can also be found in the level of narration. For example, Peyton asks Lucas to heal her, like she did when his mother is hospitalized. Their exchanged looks imply healing means more than the technical sense of the word. Thus, sex is represented as simple, without difficulty or struggle, even when losing one's virginity.

Sex is idealized, although this image is slightly altered in the last episode of Season Four when Brooke's virginal boyfriend asks her to be gentle with him when they have sex for the first time. Afterwards, he admits it took him only 60 seconds to orgasm and this makes him feel ashamed. This is a counterexample of the sexual double standard in which a man is always supposed to be in the mood for sex and stamina is considered a key element of masculinity (cf. Brown et al. 2002; Signorielli 2007). Examples of this sexual double standard and masculinity are seen in the boys who are easily seduced, are always in the mood for sex and never say no when the opportunity to have sex crosses their path. This double standard is actually addressed in the series, when the main female characters agree they should stop abiding by the double standards created by men and just be happy. All (sexual) relationships in the sample are heterosexual, and the notion of heteronormativity is drawn. It is noteworthy that the topics of homosexuality and bisexuality, with the accompanying personal dilemmas and contradictory feelings, are represented in Season Two, although only in subplots. These episodes are not part of our research sample, so further research is required on this particular topic.

Previous studies (e.g. Batchelor et al. 2004; Ward 2003) note that it is common for boys to take the first step towards a sexual relationship, however, roles are reversed in *OTH* and we see girls often initiating sexual behaviour. Girls are depicted as active sexual creatures, instead of passive and compliant. Guarding boundaries, however, is still solely connected to femininity, which is consistent with studies by Batchelor et al. (2004) and Ward (2003). Examples of the objectification of girls as sexual objects are apparent in *OTH*, and are manifested in two ways. First, the female characters who regularly use their bodies to get what they want or to intimidate boys are considered 'scheming' (self-objectification). From a post-feminist perspective, this can be seen as a modernization of femininity and an example of empowerment, although this shift remains problematic (Gill 2007). Furthermore, girls are reduced to sexual objects. Male characters do not only perform this sexual objectification, girls also objectify themselves (e.g. friends with benefits). The lack of references to contraception and safe sex in (casual) sexual relationships is problematic, and possible risks such as STDs are rarely mentioned in

the series. The only negative consequence connected with sex in the sample is possible pregnancy. Risk-free, recreational sexual behaviour seems to be the norm.

### *The look of teenage identity*

Clothing and identity are unmistakably allied for the *OTH* characters. Each has a unique style, and personal characterizations are reflected in their choice of clothes. Nathan is a typical example of a jock, whose clothes show the importance of basketball in his life even when he is not actively practicing the sport. Similarities are observed in his half-brother Lucas, although his sporty look is regularly crossed with other styles. Both characters' clothes accentuate their athletic bodies and muscled torsos (cf. Brown et al. 2002; Signorielli 2007). All male students in the series actively participate in basketball, besides Jimmy and Mouth. Mouth's thinness is accentuated by his baggy shirts, whereas Jimmy is overweight and seems to think about food constantly, a stereotype of bigger people. He is told he is sweaty, and other characters tease him. It appears a sleek, controlled figure is not only essential for females, but for males also (Gill 2007). Masculinity, muscular bodies and success are interconnected in *OTH*.

Brooke is a typical example of a popular cheerleader, who is envied for her looks, status and popularity. She is represented as a young, independent woman who does not take school seriously (cf. 'beauty of intelligence', Kim et al. 2007). Boys are her main focal point, and although only 16, she is a very sexually active. This is displayed in her sexy style, wearing short miniskirts and high heels, and exposing her cleavage. Her beauty and figure make her popular among the boys (cf. Gill 2007; Kim et al. 2007; Ross 2010). She is interested in fashion and spends a lot of time and money buying new clothes. Shopping is relaxing and therapeutic, a gender stereotypical representation of consumerism (Signorielli 2007). Later, she launches her own fashion line Clothes over Bros (Clothes over Boys), which is an instant success. This presents another example of the realization of a super-teen's dream (Aubrun and Grady 2000). Like Brooke, Peyton's identity is reflected in her style. A loner dealing with important life issues, Peyton has a passion for drawing and punk rock. This is expressed in her dark clothes, leather jacket and music T-shirts. However, occasionally her style changes to include more sexy items, such as low-cut tops, miniskirts and high heels. All have a sense of high fashion, though Haley less so at the beginning of the series. This changes when she becomes friends with the popular girls, and her style becomes more feminine and sexual. None of the female characters resembles a typical 16-year-old, due to this sexualized clothing and the fact actors in their 20s play the parts of teenagers.

Although every character appears perfect, they are never shown to be occupied with their appearance. Each female character, teenager or parent, is thin, beautiful and attractive. Their skin is even, smooth and free from pimples and unwanted body hair. The most common hairstyle is loose, and medium-length hair seems to be the norm. No character appears worried about her weight, besides Rachel who was obese prior to plastic surgery. Slimness and plastic surgery, however, are not themes in the analysed data. On the other hand, examples of girls talking disdainfully about each other's figures are apparent in the research sample. The impression is given that girls intentionally wish to harm the other, for instance, in the following conversation between Rachel and Brooke in the hospital, in the first episode of Season Four:

Rachel: 'Whore. Well, I know I'm not in heaven 'cause they'd never let Brooke Davis' skanky ass through the gates'.

Brooke: 'And your ass wouldn't fit, at least not the old one. How are you?'

### *A rebel with morality*

Most *OTH* parents are open for negotiation with their children, besides Nathan and Lucas' father Dan, who exerts power, and manipulates and dominates his family. Open dialogue results in teenagers respecting their parents, and only a few scenes show teens verbally revolting against parental authority. The small number of rebellious acts can be explained by the (temporary or permanent) absence of mentoring relationships in teenagers' lives. For three of the main characters, authority and the practice of discipline seem to be absent. However, the teenagers seem to discipline themselves and handle this freedom and lack of authority remarkably well (cf. 'super-individuals', Aubrun and Grady 2000). This representational strategy is expressed through the theme of morality on the level of narration (voice-over and plot developments).

Although *OTH* teenagers rarely revolt against their parents, legal restrictions are tested and breached several times. Numerous forms of delinquent behaviour are present in the sample, such as theft, underage drinking and sex, truancy and kidnapping. However, not all characters experience negative consequences for their behaviour. For instance, Nathan steals a minivan after a basketball game to drive him and his teammates home, though he calls it 'borrowing'. The minors are caught consuming alcohol when the van is pulled over by the police. Due to his father's connections, Nathan's name is not recorded by police and he is not punished. On several occasions, characters who act delinquently with good intentions (e.g. Lucas steals his father's financial records to expose his tax evasion) are only given a hard time (e.g. a temporarily broken friendship). They get a second chance and have their happy ending. Examples of drug use are absent in the research sample, besides the last episode of Season Four when the teenagers admit there will be drugs at a party they are going to, but the drugs are not shown in the party scenes.

There is a strong 'good-versus-bad' distinction in the series. Dan represents evil; he is one-dimensional and manipulative. Ironically, the opposite of Dan is his former partner Karen, who is also Lucas' mother. She is gentle, talks openly with her son and almost never yells. The teenagers are situated between the two characters while searching for their identities, coping with the struggles of puberty, and pushing the boundaries of right and wrong. Morality is regularly incorporated in the series. All teens have a conscience that appears when they withhold information or act inappropriately. This conscience helps them through puberty and life struggles. The general moral proclaimed in *OTH*, is that 'good' conquers 'bad' in the end, and therefore the community will be 'saved'.

## DISCUSSION

Overall results show the representation of an almost 'ideal' American society with liberal values regarding sexuality and the aspiration of (teen) dreams. *OTH* presents viewers with ideal teenage citizens (cf. 'super-individuals', Aubrun and Grady 2000) and presentations of what American adults wish they themselves could be. The characters have eventful lives, mature sexual relationships and successful careers. Moreover, they fight for their loved ones,

achieve their dreams, and conquer problems without any help from parents. Teenage identity is expressed in the ideal of the American dream, in which dreams can be reached with enough willpower and tenacity (Schwarz 1997). In this ideal American society, teenagers do not appear to be motivated by school-related issues, but rather by peers, sports and hobbies, family and romance, and focus on their dreams and passions instead (Heintz-Knowles 2000).

A dichotomy between female and male aspirations emerges in this surreal representation of characters. The impression is given that female aspiration is subordinate to male. This impression is fuelled through the dominant focus on basketball throughout the series and because girls' dreams are usually only addressed in subplots. Moreover, their friends and boyfriends do not understand and support their choices. Although these girls are confident and often strong characters, the search for a true soul mate and lover dominates their happiness (e.g. Haley's career).

Different subcultures are recognized in the series, organized around music (Haley and Peyton), sports (Nathan and Lucas) and beauty/fashion (Brooke). Intertextual references to the daily lives of the teenage audience are made through the use of popular music and guest performances by contemporary musicians, a technique often used in youth-oriented programmes by Warner Bros (*OTH* originally aired on the Warner Bros channel). These postmodernist references are motivated by overt technological, economic and synergistic imperatives, and illustrates that the boundaries between film, television and music are becoming blurred, especially in youth-oriented programmes (Wee 2010). Identity is also mirrored in characters' clothing, which provides the most recognizable example of a subcultural style (Gelder 2007: 271). This results in narrow, stereotypical and prototypical representations of jocks, cheerleaders and the 'unpopular' teenagers.

Traditional representations of femininity and masculinity can be found throughout the series. A boy's masculinity is expressed through coolness, physical force and power (Jacobson 2005). Moreover, a traditional approach to emotions is noticed, as boys often seem to lack emotional intelligence (cf. Batchelor et al. 2004). The practice of objectifying girls' bodies and sexuality, and the presence of the sexual double standard can be read as an articulation of masculinity, as is the reason teenage boys are easily seduced and rarely turn sex down. Both boys' and girls' appearances and gender identities are expressed and accentuated through their clothes. Masculinity is expressed by a muscular torso (cf. Signorielli 2005: 174–75) and femininity is embodied in attractiveness and wearing sexualized clothing (cf. Zurbriggen et al. 2007). Popular girls are confident about their body and sexuality, and sometimes use these as a 'means to an end' (e.g. 'scheming'). They are empowered, they know what they want in life and how to get it, and look nothing like the average teen, due to the age of the actors who play them. The focus on the female body is omnipresent in the series, and a thin, controlled body is normative. The impression is that a sexy body is the key source of identity, success, popularity (in life and relationships), and power (cf. Gill 2007), which reconfirms the importance of the beauty ideal in American fiction.

Theories concerning the connection of masculinity with 'doing' in the public sphere and femininity with 'being' (Jacobson 2005; Lemish 2010), should be nuanced for our research sample. It is true that in the first season, female characters can be considered passive and secondary to their male opponents; however, throughout the remainder of the series, girls become

part of the major storylines, and some emerge as positive role models of strong and independent women.

*OTH* offers viewers a fictional world in which extremely feminine girls and super masculine boys are very sexually active. No overt portrayals of intercourse are registered, probably due to the time slot, the targeted audience and the dominant norms and values. Female sexuality as passive and restricted (Aubrey 2004) is replaced and a post-feminist approach. However, the objectification of the female body and sexuality (performed by boys and girls) places this emancipative female gender script in a more negative perspective. From a post-feminist point of view, girls using their bodies to get what they want or to intimidate a boy can be seen as a modernization of femininity and an example of empowerment, although this does not mean that this shift is not problematic (Gill 2007).

More traditional representations and values regarding a sexual relationship (e.g. no sex before marriage) are also integrated in subplots, but these characters are mocked. In general, a liberal stance is taken on the topic of sexuality, as is illustrated by the frequent examples of casual sex (cf. Eyal et al. 2007). Moreover, this ideal fictional world is ruled by heteronormativity, and fails to address the topics of contraception and STDs, probably due to the influences of advertisers.

Textual analysis of the ideological constructions of masculinity and femininity underlying the representations of teenagers in *OTH* showed that teens' subcultures are often portrayed in a prototypical manner, produce commodified meanings and convey how gender is and should be lived. The series offers an articulation to the assumed universality of youth identity (Levine 2009). The representation of youth is no longer one-dimensional and negative, as was suggested by Douglas and McWilliam (2004), but is built on discourses of trouble and fun. This dichotomy is linked with the themes of morality and sexuality, with a strongly stereotypical gendered discourse towards ambition and style. *OTH* fails to incorporate atypical examples of gender roles, and dominant ideas about heteronormativity, masculinity and femininity are reinforced, except for a more liberal stance regarding (female) sexuality. Thus, this highly popular series missed the opportunity to be innovative and the teenage audience is served the same recipe.

As Hall (2000) said, popular visual culture plays an important role in the articulation of identity; therefore audience research on the interpretation of these articulations and gender roles is necessary. Additionally, investigation and comparison of the ideological constructions of masculinity and femininity in different youth-oriented programmes (e.g. 'old' versus 'new' series, American versus non-American, different genres) should also be considered as gender is subject to ongoing discursive struggle and negotiation (van Zoonen 1994). Results of the current study are consistent with studies on contemporary programmes, such as *Sex and the City* (Star 1998-2004) and *Desperate Housewives*, which hold a similar focus on topics such as the importance of beauty, body and sexuality and the search for a soul mate. Although teen TV has been studied in the past, it is useful to continue to analyse the genre for its negotiation of ideological tropes, in order for us to understand the shifts and dynamics in representations of teenagers.



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